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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: URIBE VISIT POSITIVE BUT CANNOT HEAD
OFF CRITICAL CFK POSITION ON COLOMBIAN BASE ACCESS FOR USG

Classified By: CDA Tom Kelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Despite a relatively cordial exchange between visiting Colombian President Uribe and Argentine President Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK), Argentine Government sources told the press both before and after the meeting that Argentina opposed the Colombia-U.S. agreement allowing USG forces expanded access to Colombian facilities. Colombian Ambassador to Argentina confirmed to Charge on August 7 the gist of the press comments, in particular that CFK had urged Colombia to reconsider the agreement or at least wait until "regional conditions" were more permissive. MFA sources confirmed that CFK will visit Caracas for a meeting with Hugo Chavez immediately after her August 9-10 trip to Quito. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Colombian President Alvaro Uribe called on Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK) in the late afternoon of August 5 between same-day visits to Chile and Paraguay as part of his multi-nation road show to explain Colombia's negotiations with the USG to allow access to Colombian military bases. Press reports indicated that the meeting lasted one hour and twenty minutes and that only the Presidents and the respective Argentine and Colombian Foreign Ministers, Jorge Taiana and Jaime Bermudez, participated. (Note: Colombian FM Bermudez is well known to Argentine officials; he was ambassador to Argentina before Uribe tapped him to be Foreign Minister.) Uribe told the press afterwards only that the two presidents had held "wide-ranging discussions on important issues," but unnamed Casa Rosada officials confirmed the central topic to have been Colombia's decision to allow access to some military facilities for U.S. troops.

¶3. (C) Colombian Ambassador to Argentina Alvaro Garcia Jimenez, who was not in the meeting, told CDA on August 7 that the meeting had been well organized by the Argentine Foreign Ministry. He also noted that the dynamic between CFK and Uribe was more relaxed than it has been in past encounters. Still, Garcia noted with regret that Casa Rosada sources had informed the press the day prior to the Uribe meeting that Argentina strongly opposed the Colombia-U.S. agreement.

¶4. (C) Uribe and FM Bermudez were open and transparent in the meeting, Ambassador Garcia said, and had offered full details on the agreement and answered all questions. In particular, Garcia said that Uribe had emphasized the exclusively domestic focus of the U.S.-Colombian operations, that there would be firm Government of Colombia control, and that Colombia's neighbors had nothing to fear from the U.S. presence. The agreement was described as a "consolidation" of existing U.S.-Colombia cooperation that was focused exclusively on "narco-trafficking and terrorism."

¶ 15. (U) CFK did not offer a statement after the meeting, but Casa Rosada sources told the press that she had conveyed her opposition to the Colombian decision and to the "establishment of foreign bases in Latin America." She argued that U.S. forward operating locations were "inappropriate" ("inconveniente"), Colombia "should work to lower the high levels of conflict in the region," and that the "installation of bases would not contribute to this objective." "La Nacion" said that she referred to the U.S. presence as a "timebomb waiting to go off."

¶ 16. (U) "El Pais" said that Fernandez pressed Uribe on the need for this new measure under Plan Colombia, given the perception that the FARC had been greatly diminished and almost destroyed in recent years. Uribe was said to respond that 500 tons of cocaine traffic continued to present security problems. He also explained that the U.S. would not be occupying "bases," to which CFK was said to ask, "What are they then?" Uribe offered to send her a draft of the agreement.

¶ 17. (U) Daily "El Cronista" referred to Casa Rosada sources in reporting that CFK raised specific concerns about immunity of U.S. troops operating in Colombia and their operational independence from Colombian command. According to the report, Uribe had insisted that the Colombian Government/President would maintain ultimate authority over activities of all soldiers in the country. According to "La Nacion," CFK responded that the immunity typically requested for U.S. soldiers undercut this assertion of Colombian

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authority. Pro-government "Pagina 12" reported that CFK half-jokingly warned that "no General Fernandez has ever given orders to a General Johnson."

¶ 18. (U) On 7 August, independent daily "Clarín" offered a short editorial entitled "Military bases in South America." The editorial raised a concern about the danger of arms races returning to the region, noting an ongoing increase in arms purchases in South America and then identifying a danger in the expanded U.S. Colombian presence. Whatever the justification for the U.S. presence in Colombia in terms of the fight against local narco-trafficking, "Clarín" argued that the presence had "raised alarms" in other countries, notably Brazil and Venezuela, which could contribute to further arms races.

¶ 19. (C) Colombian Ambassador Garcia expressed some amazement at the Argentine reaction, contrasting the deepening of already established U.S.-Colombian security ties with the decisions of Venezuela to enter into arms purchase and security agreements with Russia and Iran. Venezuela's reckless steps had generated no murmur of concern in the region. He opined that Argentina's positions on Colombian security issues seemed to indicate scripted positions from a block of countries, including Venezuela and Bolivia. He agreed with Charge on the importance of Brazil's and Chile's more moderate positions following the Uribe consultations and concurred that the visit to Argentina had been useful as well, even if the GOA position remained quite critical.

Background

¶ 10. (C) The Charge on August 5 had walked a presidential confidant through the difference between a military base and a forward operating location (FOL), stressing that USG conversations with Colombia were seeking to build on decades of cooperation, and that these talks were a bilateral matter between Colombia and the U.S. ADCM did the same with a high-ranking MFA official, who claimed that the MFA, in its written briefing materials for CFK, had already sought to

explain the distinction between a base and an FOL. MFA sources also confirmed that CFK will visit Caracas for a meeting with Hugo Chavez immediately after her August 9-10 trip to Quito to attend the Correa re-inauguration and UNASUR summit meeting.

Comment

¶11. (C) Argentines in government and academia have evidenced fairly limited appreciation for Colombia's security situation in recent years, so CFK's focus on the issue of U.S. force projection in South America rather than Colombia's threat assessment or legitimate security needs is not a great surprise. Nor ultimately was the evident contrast between Chilean President Bachelet's respectful neutrality and the GOA's criticism. Descriptions of the Colombian decision in several newspapers referred to "U.S. bases." To correct this misconception, we will conduct further outreach on the actual details of the Colombian decision.

KELLY